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J E A N L O U I S H A M O N.



JEAN LOUIS HAMON.

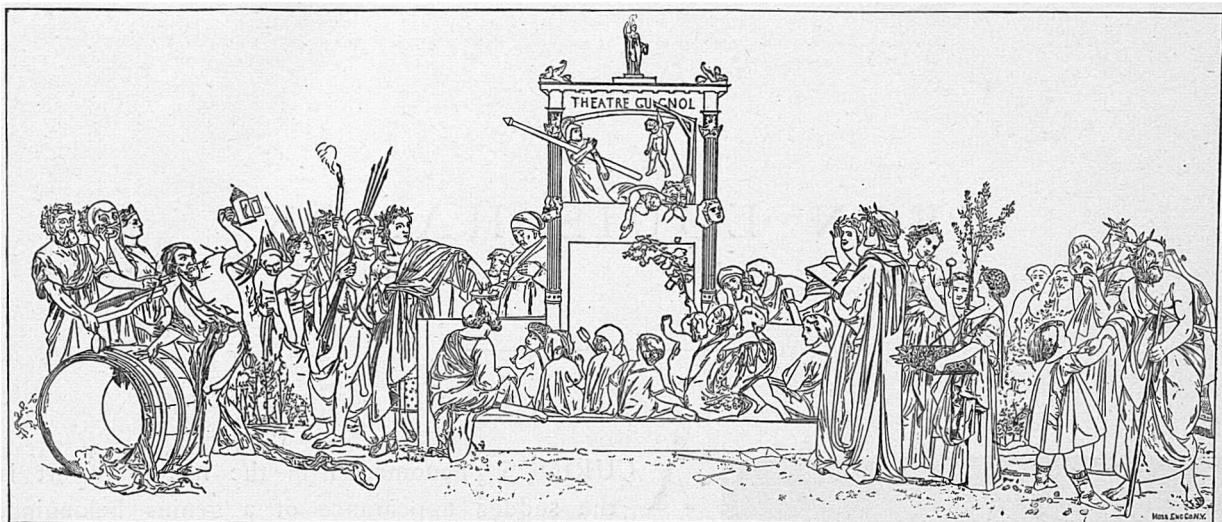
ENGRAVED BY W. B. CLOSSON.—FROM A PHOTOGRAPH.

A CURIOUS phenomenon in the history of art is the sudden appearance of a genius belonging, by instinct, development, and result, to some remote or foreign condition. The most robust manifestations of the creative spirit sometimes spring from absolutely effete and nerveless conditions of life, and, on the other hand, the rudest soil and the coarsest surroundings may produce a genius of the most delicate and refined order. The history of modern art offers no more marked illustration of this than the career of Hamon. A Breton peasant boy, he was born with the soul of a Greek, and a Greek of Southern Italy. Pompeii itself might have owned him for a son, revealing as he did by instinct the inmost secrets of that rare and delicate flower of classicism.

Jean Louis Hamon was the son of a shoemaker in the village of Plouha, in Brittany, where he was born in the year 1821. The priesthood, for which he was destined, being distasteful to him, he ran away from the seminary at which he had been entered, and went to Paris, where he arrived when he was nineteen years of age, penniless and barefoot, but determined to become a painter. He began his studies

under Paul Delaroche, but made so little progress that he was the byword and the butt of his fellow-students, who regarded his dogged perseverance as the obstinacy of stupidity, and advised him to go back to Brittany and make shoes for a living. His early years of study were signalized by great privation and bitter struggle for bare existence. Hamon's highest ambition as a neophyte was to study with Ingres; but he was repulsed by the painter on account of what the latter considered the young Breton's absolute lack of talent, and Hamon's instruction from him was limited to a careful study of his works, for which he entertained a lifelong admiration, while heartily detesting Ingres personally. This feeling arose from the refusal of Ingres to sign a petition for a pension, accorded to deserving young painters by the department in which Hamon's native village was situated. Ingres considered him below the level of ability required to merit the pension, but he at length received it without his assistance.

From the atelier of Paul Delaroche, Hamon passed into that of Gleyre, whom he resembled in poetic feeling, and in the vivacity, freshness, and delicate grace of his Greek sentiment, as distinguished from the lifeless classicism of various contemporary painters. He was first

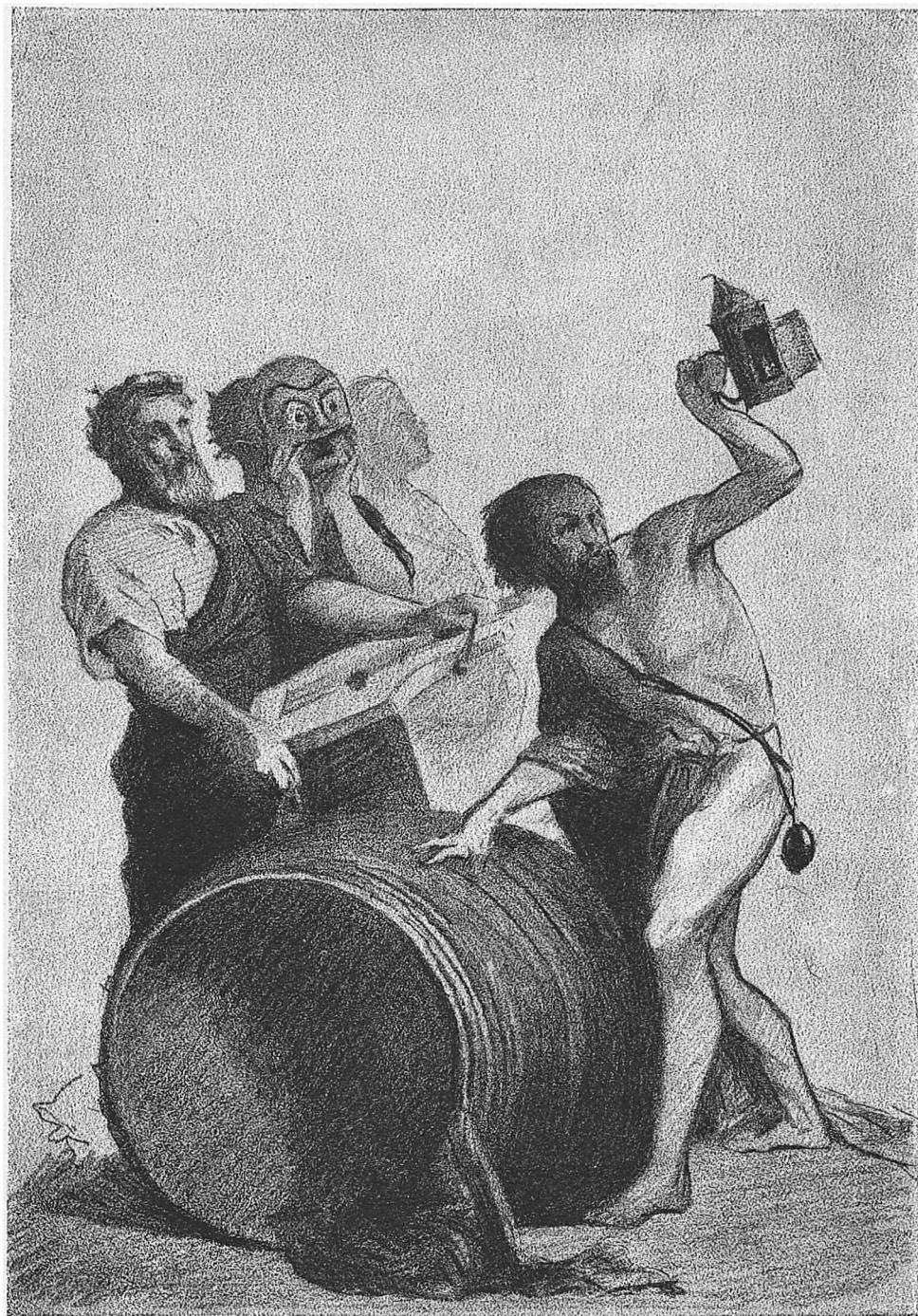


LA COMÉDIE HUMAINE.—BY J. L. HAMON.

represented at the Salon in 1848 by two canvases of no great merit. At this time he began to work for the porcelain manufactory of Sèvres. He entered the field of decoration, and painted fans, boxes, and potteries, which were highly valued, and led the way to his success in a loftier form of art. The following year three of his pictures were admitted to the Salon, and from that time his reputation was continually on the increase. His popular success dates from the production of the picture *Ma Sœur n'y est pas*, which was purchased by Napoleon III., a somewhat vulgar art critic. It procured for him the medal which his far greater work, the *Comédie Humaine* had failed to win in the exhibition of the previous year. This is a striking instance of the unhappy truth, so often realized by artists of every kind, that the work into which have passed thought, aspiration, brain, and heart, all the noblest expression of concentrated and mature genius, may utterly fail of comprehension and appreciation, while some slight and paltry *pièce de circonstance*, to which the creator attaches but slight importance, may receive unbounded applause from the vulgar element, which, after all, makes up the larger part of an artist's audience. *Ma Sœur n'y est pas* belongs to a large class of pictures painted by Hamon, possibly from motives of expediency, or at least in that lower mood of genius which leads an artist who has once found his market to work with the end of satisfying popular demand. The picture represents two little children concealing their elder sister from the eyes of her lover. Charming and graceful as it is, and one of the best examples of that peculiar phase of Hamon's genius, it is, after all, only a higher form of the *tableau de genre*. Children with dolls, children with their mothers, children grouped about a broken statue, though treated with grace and tenderness, and possessing the ideal quality of *amorini* of Pompeii rather than modern French children, were hardly the conceptions upon which to base the painter's claims to genius. On the other hand, his *Comédie Humaine*, slighted by the jury of the Salon, establishes him uncontestedly in all impartial minds as a genius of a far higher rank than his contemporaries accorded him. The picture was greatly undervalued by the art critics of the day. The centre of the canvas is occupied by the *Théâtre Guignol*, or puppet-show, still seen on the Champs Elysées. The puppets are Minerva, Bacchus, and Cupid. A group of children sits gazing at the show from a stone bench. Among them is placed an old man, evidently Socrates. On the right, looking at the small theatre with profound attention, are the poets of the world, among them Homer, Dante, and Virgil. Their stern figures are relieved by the delicate grace of women and children of that half classic, half modern type peculiar to Hamon. On the left are grouped philosophers and warriors. Diogenes, with his tub, holding his lantern so that its light may fall on the stage, is the most conspicuous figure of the group at the extreme left, which balances that on the extreme right,—Homer led by a child, and a tragic poet, probably Æschylus. Taking payment

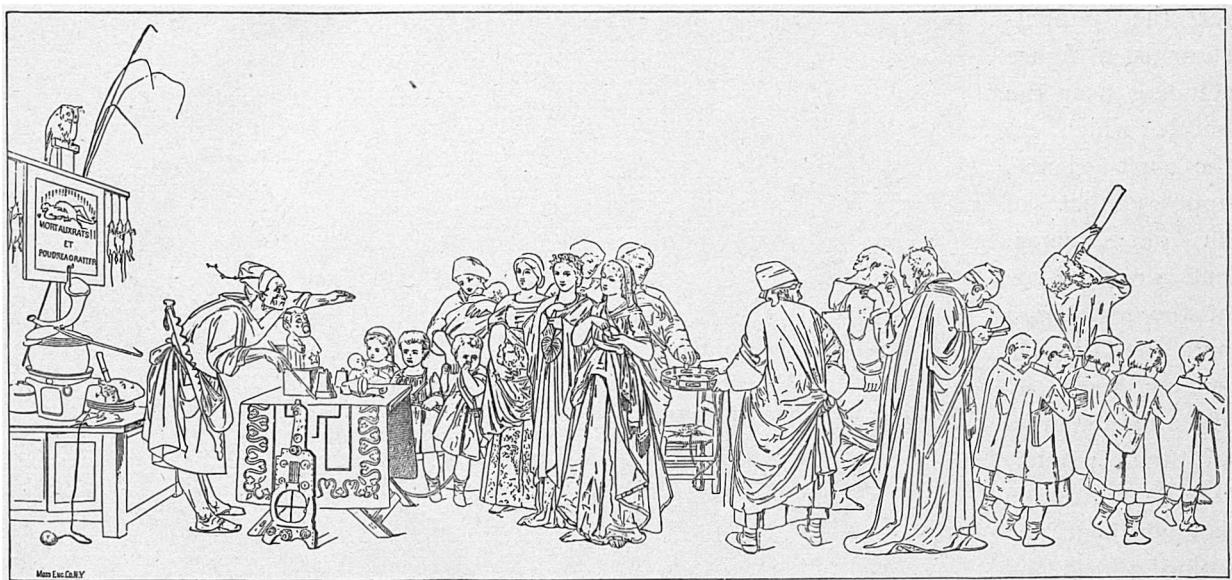
for the puppet-show is a figure standing near the booth, which, at the first glance, appears that of an old woman, but adroitly hints at the priesthood and the Church, as conceived by the atheistic mind of the painter. The composition is excellent, the coloring fresh, and the subtle satire of the conception gives the picture that literary quality which, though little valued by artists, is an important factor in the permanent interest of a work to the world at large. The *Escamoteur*, or mountebank, another important work, treats with equally fine satiric sentiment a similar problem of human life. The mountebank stands before his conjuring-table, showing a puppet, in the shape of a demon springing from a

box, to a group of wondering women and children. The heads of the latter are of especial loveliness. The women, with their statuesque draperies, wreathed and hooded heads, and classic repose, contrast finely with the homely realism of the conjurer's figure, with its wrinkled limbs, face, and throat, and oratorical attitude. Behind him is a rude cupboard, upon which stands the earthen brazier, with the soup-pot and skillet. Some plates, a large loaf of bread with a knife thrust into it, and an unfinished stocking and ball of yarn, occupy the remaining space, while above, attached to a post, is a large placard advertising rat-powder, with dead rats hanging from the cross-bars on either side. A horn is suspended from a nail over the soup-pot, an owl is perched above the placard, and a long reed curves toward the top of the picture,—an effective



GROUP FROM "LA COMÉDIE HUMAINE."

DRAWN BY T. W. DEWING.—AFTER HAMON.



L'ESCAMOTEUR.—BY J. L. HAMON.

touch of composition, since it balances the telescope of the star-gazer at the extreme right of the canvas. This figure forms one of a group offsetting that of the women and children. Two philosophers walk apart, in deep thought. A priest, rod in hand, pores over his breviary as he follows a company of young seminarists. The satire of the conception is heightened and the composition strengthened by the presence of an ancient beldam, presumably the mountebank's wife, in nightcap and tattered gown, with a knitting-needle thrust in her hair, who extends her tambourine to the group of women, while glancing contemptuously at the philosophers and sages. This realistic figure, so adroitly placed between the two classically treated groups, gives the keynote to the significance of the picture.

Les Muses à Pompeii, representing the Muses sorrowing over the unearthed city, shows the painter in his most ideal mood. The attitudes are full of grace, and the heads of nobility and sentiment. Another work of the purest Pompeian feeling is *La Boutique à Quatre Sous*,—two maidens choosing small statues from the stock of a merchant who stands behind his display of wares. It is a remarkable realization of that genre side of classic life typified by the gay Roman watering-place. The female heads and draperies are especially noteworthy as examples of Hamon's peculiar modern quality, even in the rendering of the antique. His classic feeling was not the severe Greek of Athens and the time of Pericles, but the gay and joyous Greek of the descendants of that *Æneas* who wandered towards the setting sun. His draperies are modern garments arranged in the classic manner, his heads the small, delicate heads of young girls of Paris, made Greek by the touch of a skilful hand.

L'Atelier du Statuaire offers an excellent example of this method, here hardly as successful as elsewhere. In the figure of *La Jardinière*, while the drapery is distinctively modern, the treatment is of the simplest classic order, the folds being laid in straight lengths. In the *Fleur des Champs* the accessories of the picture are better worthy attention than the figure, the grace of the drapery being offset by the weak drawing of the head. Hamon was not altogether above reproach in his drawing, but his floating draperies—as in the three figures in *La Promenade*, and in the charming figure of *La Fermière*—are generally extremely well handled.

Hamon's decorative pictures are widely known and reproduced. He had full consciousness of the decorative value of flowers and shrubs, and employed them largely and effectively as accessories. In the *Comédie Humaine* straight, small-leaved stems spring up at the feet of the philosophers and warriors, and a naked child extends a vine branch with grapes upon it, against the blank wall of the booth, to be grasped by the prostrate puppet Bacchus,—an effective



PART OF "L'ESCAMOTEUR."

DRAWN BY T. W. DEWING.—AFTER HAMON.



FIGURE FROM "L'ATELIER DU STATUAIRE."

DRAWN BY T. W. DEWING.—AFTER HAMON.

was regarded by his contemporary critics as feeble and vaporous. But in color, as well as in drawing, he showed himself thoroughly consistent with the classic character of his subjects.

Hamon's genius belonged to that order which rarely meets with recognition during its lifetime. To his contemporary critics he appeared only a graceful and pleasing artist, to be dismissed with a few words. He was for a long time rightly appreciated only by his brother painters, and by an eclectic circle of lovers of art. Hamon himself suffered intensely from the

touch both of satire and composition. The *Aurore* contains admirable leafage, though the figure is weak and insipid. The *Crépuscule*, a girlish hooded figure floating over a field of poppies, is charming in sentiment and execution. One of the painter's most original decorative works is *L'Automne*, exhibited not long ago in Boston,—a floating female figure, with wings above its temples, hiding its eyes with one hand, while in the other it holds an extinguisher, with which it is about to cover a large white rose, the last left on a stalk from which the leaves are dropping. An *amorino* is putting out the flowers on another spray with a smaller extinguisher. The absolute simplicity of the treatment heightens the beauty of the idea. Another charming example of Hamon has also been recently seen in Boston,—a field of cabbages, each enfolding a child, after the French nursery legend that children grow in cabbages, while an angel in a blue robe, with a gold band about his head, sits among them watching their growth. By the side of the angel is a small gold watering-pot. Behind him is an horizon line of sea, and an instance of Hamon's skill in composition is the harmony between the straight lines of the watering-pot and those of the sea. Hamon's peculiar arrangement of his figures gives his pictures a decorative quality apart from their intention. As a colorist he

disposition on the part of the public to underrate his value, and to accept his least worthy productions, while tacitly rejecting his best conceptions. Especially in his later years did this feeling gain upon him. The very refinement and delicacy of his work probably contributed to the delay in its acceptance at its proper value. The public saw in him only a clever genre painter, long after he had proved himself a living ideal of classic grace. In his best moods Hamon worked for something higher than mere popularity, and received his reward at the hands of the few choice souls who look beyond the judgment of the crowd to the mainspring of an artist's genius. Even since his death, in 1874, Hamon's reputation has increased so slowly as to astonish his admirers, and it is doubtful whether his audience will ever be much larger, since he appeals to the highest instincts of art and the most delicate and elevated form of the imagination. The enthusiasm of the vulgar will never be the reward of the artist's lifetime of toil; but he can well dispense with it. Personally he was full of gayety and charming frankness and humor, with an undercurrent of that bitterness common to all men of unrecognized genius. His appearance always retained much of the Breton peasant. His eyes seemed looking towards far horizons, his forehead was full of thought and imagination, the lower part of his face was concealed by a heavy beard and moustache.

One of the peculiarities of Hamon's genius is this, that it united the most delicate and feminine qualities with the most robust and masculine, the most ideal with the most realistic. It is difficult to believe that the satire and vigor of the *Comédie Humaine* and the exquisite tenderness and melancholy of *L'Automne* were the outgrowth of one mind, the production of one hand,—that the lofty poetry of *Les Muses à Pompeii* and the sturdy realism of the figures of *L'Escamoteur* and his wife could have been generated in the same brain. Taken as a whole, Hamon, while rising but rarely to those heights of robustness attained by certain members of the school to which he belongs, may be regarded, for the consistency and purity of his classic feeling, as one of the most important developments of that vital manifestation of modern French art,—the Neo-Grec.

CHARLOTTE ADAMS.



TWILIGHT.

DRAWN BY T. W. DEWING.—AFTER HAMON.